

Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU)



ZCTU PRESIDENT PETER MUTASA'S MAY DAY MESSAGE TO THE WORKERS OF ZIMBABWE

THEME; 'Stop COVID-19 Pandemic, Scale up Social Protection and Dialogue, Save Jobs and Pay a Living Wage'

1 MAY 2020

Let me start by thanking the Almighty God for keeping us safe in this difficult world and trying times. We give him all the glory and reverence.

The working people of Zimbabwe and Zimbabweans at large, today I address you from your homes during this Workers' Day, the first such an address since the formation of your organisation, the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) on 28 February 1981.

The ZCTU is fully aware that while homes should be a comfortable place for every human being, there is so much discomfort in your homes right now after you have endured 33 days under the lockdown. The little provisions that you

might have set aside for the lockdown could have been exhausted long back and most of you are looking forward to the resumption of normal life in order to provide for your families.

Indeed it has been a difficult period for most of us poor citizens. We are not ashamed or apologetic that we, through the Tripartite Negotiation Forum (TNF) supported the lockdown as a means to save lives. Yes, it was necessary considering the unpreparedness of our country and the state of our health delivery system in the face of such a massive pandemic. We could not allow workers to die for profits. However, we are disappointed that despite our advice to the government that the government and employers must provide the safety nets for citizens and workers during these difficult times nothing tangible has been done. In particular the ZCTU called for the following:

1. That employers in both formal and informal economy put in place robust COVID-19 mechanisms to protect workers in risky sectors, especially service sectors where there is more person to person contact.
2. That the government prioritise its expenditures to create fiscal space and free -up resources that can be used to support efforts to deal with direct and indirect impacts of COVID-19 pandemic.
3. We called for enhanced social protection support in order to minimize the economy's contraction as well as protecting its citizens and businesses against the direct and indirect shocks of COVID-19.
4. We argued that the ZWL\$200 per household being suggested by the government is way below requirements and that people be supported through at least provision of food packages or food allowances based on the Food Povepegged at \$1,863.00 as at December 2019 and now ZWL2365.15

5. The ZCTU also called for companies that need critical workers to be at work to provide them with appropriate requirements that keep them safe from being infected and also infecting those at home. In addition, they should be paid a hazardous allowance.
6. We also said that the government must support business enterprises to protect jobs that are threatened by direct and indirect disruption to businesses in the form of:
 - ✓ Tax relief measures; and/or;
 - ✓ A stimuli package for hardest hit sectors such as tourism, agriculture and manufacturing. However there must be strict conditions to these bail outs to guarantee job preservation and contribution to economic recovery.
7. We demanded a moratorium on retrenchments to protect direct and indirectly affected workers. Retrenchments during the COVID-19 pandemic will further contribute to socio-economic dislocations.
8. Furthermore, we called for the up scaling of health systems and infrastructure, water and sanitation.
9. Above all, we said government should subsidise essential social services such as water and electricity to households during the lockdown so as to avoid citizens queuing at service provider's offices to pay for these services.

Fellow workers of Zimbabwe, you can judge for yourself if any of these issues were taken aboard. Our assessment is that despite these suggestions, the government did very little to ameliorate the plight of Zimbabweans. Many citizens are starving in their homes and many are literally scavenging .There is so much talk without action. Citizens are forced to choose between covid19 deaths or starvation. The government has forsaken the people.

As a class, we must critically analyse the government's response to the

pandemic and its lack of care for the suffering masses. Prior to covid19, we already faced a humanitarian crisis. According to World Food Program 7,7 million Zimbabweans face starvation. Inflation is hovering above 676% at a time salaries of the majority of workers are well below the understated March Total Consumption Poverty Line of ZWL6420.87 Many other workers earn below the Food Poverty Line which stand at ZWL 2365.15. Our salaries and pensions have been eroded due to illogical policies meant to create arbitrage for the few connected political elites and their cronies. We suffer endemic poverty with 34% in extreme poverty while close to 70% live in poverty.

It is therefore clear that our problems did not emerge from covid19 pandemic but were worsened by this epidemic. Covid19 has exposed the many years of chronic corruption. The Auditor General in her report exposed serious corruption in many state related entities. We are currently food insecure and witnessing shortages of mealie-meal but USD 3.2 Billion was reported to have been used to fund Command Agriculture through an opaque arrangement with a private entity. Our suffering can be traced to nefarious activities of these parasitic cartels operating in many of our sectors including energy, agriculture, banking and mining. Clientelism is deep in our governance practices thereby breeding inefficiencies and leakages. Nepotism has created parastatals that have always been draining the fiscus.

Definitely such a state that is run by a few for a few could not address a pandemic of such magnitude. A state pursuing crony capitalism doesn't have the ability or will to provide needs of the people, let alone in a crisis. Covid19 also exposed inability of the government to unite people and leverage on our diversity to fight a common enemy. Even when faced with this formidable enemy, the government still prioritizes politics and power over the common good.

Again, covid19 exposed, the many economic and social fault lines we have in our

country. The neoliberal agenda that the government has been pursuing since the first ESAP supported by the Bretton Woods institutions has decimated our economy to unimaginable levels. The current administration's ESAP II headlined by austerity measures and lack of concern for public services provision led us to the current state. Our hospitals and clinics are now a caricature of the yesteryear functional facilities we inherited from the colonial regime. Only the rich can access top of the range private hospitals and chartered flights for medical tourism. The rest of us are forced to make do with dilapidated and ill-equipped facilities. Our doctors, nurses, radiographers and other medical professionals are mocked and hounded out of the country due to frustration.

The situation is the same with our education. Teachers are demotivated, enslaved and infrastructure is neglected by the few elites whose kids learn abroad. Most of our children are learning in environments that are deplorable and not fit for education. Teachers stay in squalor, without electricity, water and suitable ablution facilities in this 21st century. All this because the government is adamant on pursuing austerity policies that failed everywhere else around the globe. What else is functioning in this country? Nothing, we queue for almost everything fuel, mealie-meal, water, cooking gas, sugar, you name it. Our residences are without water and electricity daily, prices of basic goods and services are beyond the reach of the majority. Workers around the country are enslaved and working in similar conditions as in colonial era.

We demand an end to labour market flexibility and the current austerity measures that has reduced workers to paupers. Capitalism has failed, Forward with Socialism. Only a socialist state can protect people and workers against recurring pandemics and economic crisis.

Inequality has deepened, in fact the current administration has perfected the colonial divide between the privileged and the neglected. The only difference is

that, now its no longer about race, it is fellow blacks treating their compatriots like dirty.

Forty years after independence, we still have citizens cramped up in colonial built settlements around the country. After taking land from the whites, our people are still referred to as squatters around the country. Many workers have been on housing waiting lists for many years hoping to acquire 180 square metres while some own multiple farms. When it is said that, we took back our land, why is the majority of the people not part of the we? Why do others get 2000 hectares of land for free while the majority have to pay dearly, in some cases as much as USD10000 for only 200 square metres? According to various reports there is a deficiency of almost 1, 3 million housing units. Many have been on housing waiting lists since independence. Harare had over 151000, while Bulawayo had over 121000 as at December 2019. The majority are discouraged and can not even afford to pay for the housing waiting list. We demand the immediate acquisition of urban and peri-urban land for workers at no cost to enable workers to have somewhere to build a shelter.

Furthermore, Covid19 has exposed the hypocrisy of the ruling class and their cronies. They rob all of us of the fruits of our toil only to appear as our benefactors. They take it as a hobby to parade the poor on media as they donate few goods bought by what they looted from us.

Who has not been robbed? The pensioner who worked tirelessly for all his economic life, has lost. The tobacco farmer who toil the whole year is robbed a quarter of her earnings at the auction floors. A maize, cotton or soya bean farmer is robbed too. Workers both in formal and informal sectors are robbed also through currency debauchery.

The greatest lesson out of all this is that it is clearly a matter of us and them. Don't be confused by the paternalistic and somehow persuasive but deceitful rhetoric that we are in this together. We are not, we must unite first as a class as workers and the peasants and craft our united fight back. Don't be confused by political slogans they craft to give a fake feeling of unity between them and us. They only use us for votes and dump us once they attain power. These political slogans by the elites only work to divide and weaken us. The poor can not afford to fight each other anymore on behalf of the rich. We now need one political slogan which has always been the political slogan of the poor. Amadhla, Awethu: Masimba, Kuvanhu : Power, To the People. This is the only strategy and slogan that will liberate us from the jaws of brutal dictatorship and capricious and selfish capitalism we suffer under.

We have no other choice than organizing, mobilizing and agitating for a new social and economic order. However, we can not mobilize on the basis of sectors. No more informal – formal divide, no more urban – rural divide, no more public – private sector divide, no east, west, south and north divide only the poor and oppressed collectively waging a struggle for freedom and emancipation. The poor MDC supporters are scavenging for food and the poor ZANU PF supporters are also starving and scavenging. So, what is the basis of the division? The working class has one struggle that of destroying capitalism, corruption, cartels, nepotism, inequalities, gender and other forms of discrimination, state repression and dictatorship that have caused

so much misery to our class. I am inviting all of you to this worthy struggle. It will be tough, they will brutalize, arrest, torture and kill some of us. Be assured victory is certain if we are united and determined. Slave masters, feudal lords, colonialism, apartheid were all defeated by the people. This is what we learnt from the heroic sacrifices of the Haymarket warriors who got us the 8 hour working day through their blood which is the foundation for this May Day commemorations. That is what Zimbabwean labour movement icons like

Benjamin Burombo, Masotsha Ndlovu, Joshua Nkomo, Morgan Tsvangirai and many others taught us through their heroic struggles for freedom and emancipation. Amandla Awethu

At this juncture, it is important to emphasise that there are laws that were promulgated in the fight against COVID-19, particularly those to do with safety at the workplace. Employers who are not adhering to them must be prosecuted. We also call for non partisan distribution of food aid during this period of great need. This is not time to campaign with aid at the expense of people's lives as we have seen in some quarters.

According to the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), two hundred million jobs are forecast to be lost, millions of people are at risk of being thrown back into poverty due to COVID-19 and at the same time inequality that already existed is growing deeper. The two-thirds of the world's population with inadequate or no social protection are severely exposed, with many facing destitution and starvation.

ITUC also noted that the impact of this crisis have brutally exposed the failings of the model of globalisation which has been imposed on working women and men. Public health systems have been debilitated by austerity, and the erosion of workers' rights has left untold millions of workers exposed. Women, migrant workers, ethnic minorities and others who face discrimination are bearing a particularly heavy burden. This is even more so true in Zimbabwe. This must change.

As we await the next step by the government as we come to the end of this extended lockdown, we need to reflect on the post COVID 19 and the future of

work. The ZCTU is celebrating this year's Workers Day under the theme; **'Stop COVID-19 Pandemic, Scale up Social Protection and Dialogue, Save Jobs and Pay a Living Wage'**, and like trade unions all over the world, we demand that the post COVID-19 economy must have the following objective:

1. **JOB**S: As jobs are being destroyed, full employment must be the goal, with decent work for all; healthy and safe conditions; formalisation of informal work; and an end to precarious work.
2. **INCOMES**: There is no doubt that wages' share of the economy has been falling for decades and risks plummeting with this crisis. Poverty Datum Line minimum living wages must be in place. We continue to demand that wages be linked to the united states dollars as it has proved that the use of the local currency has failed under the present galloping inflationary environment.
3. **SOCIAL PROTECTION**: millions of people have been left without social protection and are at grave risk from the devastating health and the economic effects of this crisis. Government must fund social protection for all.
4. **SOCIAL DIALOGUE**: All interventions must be products of broad consultations and not arbitral decisions of the government or businesses.

While we are all fighting for our lives following the COVID 19, we are aware of our unfinished business of fighting for a reasonable living minimum wage. You are all aware that the government gazetted a minimum wage of ZWL\$2 500.00 that is well below the Poverty Datum Line (PDL) and before that the ZCTU was in the process of mobilizing workers to take action. We have not abandoned our quest for a better wage. We are pursuing it, for a living wage is one of the surest ways of fighting the pandemic.

Lest we forget, the year 2019, marked a high degree of violence and intimidation
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against trade unionists and pro democracy advocates. People were shot dead during the January 2019 demonstrations for exercising their right. Trade union leaders were arrested and continually appeared in court on flimsy reason. It is also the year the government enacted a new repressive legislation, the Maintenance of Public Order and Security Act (MOPA) to replace the equally repressive Public Order and Security Act (POSA) which a lot of people have likened to the Law and Order Maintenance Act of the Ian smith regime. These things are still with us and remind us of what sort of government we have.

The law enforcement agents still insist on ZCTU seeking permission from them to hold any activities including workshops and meetings despite the law exempting trade unions from seeking police clearance. In fact the police only need to be notified not to grant permission for an activity to go ahead. In some instances trade unions have been denied the opportunities for commemorating important days by the police on flimsy reasons like that they do not have enough manpower. In essence the Police have deliberately made it difficult for the ZCTU to operate as they disregard the laws they are supposed to safeguard. These are some of things we will continue to confront post COVID-19.

Let me also add our voice in condemning the current wave of racism that is taking place in the so called "our all weather friend" China. Despite all the red carpet we are giving them in Zimbabwe, including pilfering our resources, it is disturbing to hear how the Chinese are treating place in the wake of Corona 19 outbreak. This is unacceptable and we demand an apology. We know they are highly protected by some big guys in this country who are somehow benefiting from them despite our complaints of the way they ill treat black people even in this country . We are saying they should stop before people take things into their hands.

Fellow workers, the COVID 19 is not just an assault on the economy, but also on

our rights. We have already seen that the government took advantage of the lockdown period to destroy the livelihoods of the informal sector by destroying their work places around the country. We will not be surprised when we go back to our workplaces to find that things have changed drastically. Some will find the doors closed completely while some would find themselves unwanted. The pandemic will result in thousands, if not millions of workers being retrenched. We have to brace ourselves for such eventualities at our workplaces. Let us rethink the concept of work. Our old trade union principles such as cooperatives need to be reimagined.

We have also seen heightened security forces brutality against people in the name of enforcing the law. If we do not protect these rights, they may be gone post COVID 19. We need to guard jealously our *Freedom of Assembly and Association and Freedom of Expression*. We have seen people being arrested for assembling and we have seen people being arrested for so-called spreading falsehood. While the ZCTU is against spreading of falsehoods knowingly when we are facing such a dangerous pandemic, there is also need to balance with the person's right to freedom of expression. COVID 19 could be used to take away these rights.

Coincidentally, this year is also a year we celebrate 40 years of independence. As we said in our independence message, we appreciate the significance of the role played by those who fought against minority rule. However, it is unfortunate that their great work has been shadowed by the today's rulers. Freedoms and liberties such as economic freedom, the right to assembly and associate remain a mirage. Decayed infrastructure, poverty, poor wages, corruption, violence, fear, deprivation, segregation, inequalities and repression are the order of the day.

The neo-liberal policies of the present government has eroded people's salaries

and wages. Virtually all pension schemes have become useless.

We are still concerned that the government continues to implement reforms without consultations of the stake holders. In particular, we demand an inclusive Tripartite Negotiations Forum (TNF) led economic reforms. Social dialogue is the only way out.

The ZCTU is still concerned that this country is still highly polarised and this continues to pull the country backwards. There is no substitute to dialogue if we are to solve our political problems. But it must not be just dialogue, but inclusive dialogue and we believe the current political 'dialogue' is inadequate and not inclusive enough.

Let me end by saying this May Day, workers, join us in celebrating the lives of working men and women who are on the front lines during the pandemic. We salute the workers in healthcare and other frontline sectors whose work is essential, saving lives and providing vital products and services. Some have died fighting for us. We are indebted for their invaluable work. For the rest of Zimbabwe stay safe and as we await announcement of the further steps from the authorities in our fight against COVID-19, STAY AT HOME!!!

GOD BLESS WORKERS OF ZIMBABWE

I THANK YOU!